DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 236 751 CS 504 460

AUTHOR Jensen, Marvin D.
TITLE Studying Intrapersonal Communication through Memoirs and Journals.
PUB DATE 25 Mar 83
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Conference on Culture and Communication (5th, Philadelphia, PA, March 25, 1983).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Authors; *Autobiographies; Cognitive Processes; Communication (Thought Transfer); Communication Research; *Diaries; Memory; Mythology; *Personal Narratives; *Self Expression; *Writing (Composition)
IDENTIFIERS *Reflective Writing

ABSTRACT

One theoretical approach to self-awareness is the study of introspective writing. Among the characteristics of intrapersonal communication that can be explored through memoirs and journals are selective memory and chronology revision. From the reflections of writers like Lillian Hellman, Dag Hammarskjold, and May Sarton comes confirmation that memories are subjectively gleaned, but their honest recording of this selectiveness echoes an important mental process. Recall of the past is not only selective but often out of sequence. Memories surface and provide a context for the present and are in turn reexamined from the perspective of a later time. Selective memory and chronology revision contribute to the development of personal myth, which parallels the role of myth in a culture. This merging of old memories and current aspirations is frequently echoed in reflective writing. Myth is a form of truth, and it draws on the past and future to explain the present. Personal myth is the particular subjective context within which experience is arranged and understood. It merges the real with the ideal, achievement with aspiration. Journals and memoirs are partial records of the facts and myths that define a life. Within each person--sometimes echoed in reflective writing--is the unique ordering of facts that is that person's truth. (HOD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED236751

STUDYING INTRAPERSONAL COMMUNICATION THROUGH MEMOIRS AND JOURNALS

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

Marvin D. Jensen
Assistant Professor of Communication
University of Northern Iowa
Cedar Falls, Iowa 50614

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Marvin D. Jensen
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Presented at the Fifth International Conference on Culture and Communication, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, March 25, 1983.

CS 504460

As an instrument in communication classrooms, introspective writing has been primarily used as an experiential approach to self-awareness. The purpose of this paper is to suggest a complementary theoretical approach--the study of introspective writing by others, as found in their memoirs and journals.

Memoirs and journals are not simple records of experience. Christina Baldwin, who has pioneered both therapeutic and educational uses of journal writing, has said (1977:xiv, xvi): "The journal is a connection of the self with the self. . . . The journal is a river--is a mirror--is an anchor--is myself." Unlike diaries and logs, memoirs and journals are not intended as linear accounts, but contain fragments which are often more revealing than an ordered sequence of facts. The stream of consciousness writing in many memoirs and journals provides an opportunity to glimpse another person's internal communication, and to see in it a process common to all people. Ira Progoff believes journals capture the "underground stream of images and recollections within each of us." He suggests this "stream is nothing more or less than our interior life" (Kaiser 1981:67).

The study of an honest journal or memoir not only reveals another person's introspection, but reminds us that people are more similar than different. Nowhere are these similarities so apparent as in the intricacies of our thought processes. Emerson advised Thoreau: "Record your own spontaneous thought and you will record that which men everywhere find true for them also. A wholly truthful report of your own life will be true of all lives" (Haight 1942:ix-x). More recently, a critic wrote

of Russell Baker's memoir Growing Up: "his way of telling his secrets makes you proud of your own."

Among the characteristics of intrapersonal communication which can be explored through memoirs and journals are selective memory and chronology revision. This paper will explore these two factors and the personal myths which develop through these processes--myths which are the subjective truths that define our lives.

SELECTIVE MEMORY

Memory of one's own past is unreliable, even for the most perceptive person. As an adult, Jean Piaget clearly remembered being kidnapped from his baby carriage along the Champs Élysées in Paris. He recalled "t. gathering crowd, the scratches on the face of the heroic nurse who saved him, the policeman's white baton, the assailant running away." In spite of his vivid memory of this incident, Piaget eventually discovered that his nurse had made up the entire story. Her detailed repetition of the fictitious event made him certain he remembered it (Loftus 1980:120-121).

But the process of memory alteration occurs even without external intervention. Wright Morris describes this pattern in his memoirs (1981:7):

> A memory for . . . details is thought to be characteristic of the writer, but the fiction is already at work in what he remembers. No deception is intended, but he wants to see clearly what is invariably, intrinsically vague. So he imagines. Image-making is indivisibly a part of remembering.

Russell Baker recognizes that selective memory can serve the needs of a current role, e.g., parenting. He describes in his memoirs (1982:7-8) the habit of recalling to his children the hardships of "his day" which conveniently contrast with their advantages. Conversely, from a daughter's perspective, Madeleine L'Engle in her journal (1974) sifts memories of her mother in search of an image larger than her mother's aged and diminished state.

Martin T. Orne concludes from his research (1979:315-318) that memory revision is so inherent that it occurs even under hyponosis. Under his observation, hypnotized subjects gave vivid descriptions of friends who sat beside them in the fifth grade, but school records showed that some of those "classmates" were never in those classes. Orne ascribes the popular impression that memories can be wholly retrieved to the early writings of Sigmund Freud. Freud pioneered the "reliving" of experiences through hypnotically induced age regression, but he later realized that such memories are "emotional" rather than "historical" accounts--often combining "several actual events and many fantasies."

Nonetheless the selectiveness which characterizes human memory may serve an essential purpose. Robert Ornstein (1972:16-37) considers the senses to be a data-reduction system, separating relevant information from the mass of data which would otherwise overwhelm us. Aldous Huxley once described (1954:22-23) the brain and nervous system as a reducing valve which limits perception to information needed for survival. Possibly this selection process contributes to emotional as well as physical survival--and allows us, in John Irving's words, "to invent our lives" (1981:400).

Selective memory does not invalidate journals and memoirs, but both author and reader should recognize that retrospective writings are vehicles of self-definition rather than self-revelation. As such they are still valuable maps of intrapersonal communication. Lillian Hellman acknowledges the inevitable subjectiveness at the beginning of her memoir Pentimento (1973:1).

> Old paint on canvas, as it ages, sometimes becomes transparent. When that happens it is possible, in some pictures, to see the original lines: a tree will show through a woman's dress, a child makes way for a dog, a large boat is no longer on an open sea. That is called pentimento because the painter "repented," changed his mind. Perhaps it would be as well to say that the old conception, replaced by a later choice, is a way of seeing and then seeing again.
>
> That is all I mean about the people in this book. The paint has aged now and I wanted to see what was there for me once, what is there for me now.

"What is there" for Hellman when she writes in retrospect may or may not be more accurate than her initial perceptions. But more important is that Pentimento provides a glimpse at the way the mind sorts, weighs, and filters images from the past. This process is also illustrated in Dag Hammarskjöld's journal Markings. He begins one passage with these words: "It must have been late in September. Or, perhaps, my memory has invented an appropriate weather for the occasion" (1964:29).

May Sarton, in her memoir A World of Light, illustrates that important influences linger and resurface in the mind long after the fact, and sometimes resurface in different forms. In this memoir, she is celebrating persons who touched her with such intensity that she sees them as muses who inspired her writing. But Sarton finds that an objective description of her experiences with these people is impossible. The quality of each person's impact is reconsidered as she views them through the perspective of time. She says (1976:15):

> Writing of these people whom I loved has been a great deal harder than I could possibly have imagined. For nothing in the past stays fixed forever; as we grow and change the past changes; when I looked back I did not always find exactly what I had expected, and even such seminal friendships became minefields. Some unexpected conflict or painful memory exploded and changed all the fixed points.

From the reflections of writers like Hellman, Hammarskjöld, and Sarton comes confirmation that memories are subjectively gleaned, but their honest recording of this selectiveness echoes an important mental process.

CHRONOLOGY REVISION

Recall of the past is not only selective, but often out of sequence. Memories surface and provide a context for the present and are in turn re-examined from the perspective of a later time. The lack of chronology which characterizes childhood memories may be due to limited encoding ability at a young age; the early memories that do exist seem dependent

on repetition or strong emotional content. White and Pillemer (1979:61-67) describe such memories as generic or semantic in nature, with no temporal connection among them. Bransford et al. go further by saying that memory throughout life is less a system of records than a "stage setting" which is modified and rearranged as successive events enlarge and illuminate the past (1977).

Hilary Masters, in his memoir Last Stands (1982), begins with the funerals of his grandfather and father and moves backward to earlier events. One of his reviewers (Gray 1982:96) writes: "This narrative order runs counter to chronology . . . but it remains true to the odd regressions of memory, that domain where the last events are most recent and hence preludes to all that went before." Masters reviews complex images that remain in his mind, images which are comprised of many events and his still evolving perceptions of those events. Reflecting the seamless quality of his thoughts, Masters sometimes shifts years in mid-paragraph as one memory evokes another. Another critic (Prescott 1982:82) calls this an "alloy of past and present" as "one scene yields to another and then resumes to be interrupted again, yet all parts advance a determined theme: a train ride to a new life, for instance, or the grandfather's need to establish his heroism." Masters recalls his grandfather's stories of the last stands of cavalrymen and Indians, events which his grandfather lived, remembered selectively, and gave as gifts to his grandson. But in retrospect he is equally influenced by the last stand of his elderly grandmother when she finally rejected her husband's coarseness and withdrew into her own mental world.

Masters also remembers his father Edgar Lee Masters making his last efforts to disprove the critics who thought him a one-work poet. In Hilary Masters' mind, the memories of his father's struggle merge with funeral images and give way to remembered moments when his father seemed larger than life or tragically diminished. In life, recent events usually have antecedents and this memoir reveals the human mind reflecting on both at once.

As André Malraux lay seriously ill, suffering a high fever, he attempted to capture in journal form the recurring thoughts which surfaced in his mind (1977). His life did not flash in sequence before his eyes. Instead the images which came back to him were points of reference for his life, events which often exceeded his personal history yet shaped his thoughts. One image that had long preoccupied him involved the first use of poison gas by German soldiers in World War I. After following orders and using the gas, the German soldiers saw the hideous results of their actions and many broke ranks to carry injured Russians out of the trenches. Soldiers who moments before had blindly followed orders now spontaneously disobeyed, and risked their lives to help the enemy. Malraux had not been a participant or observer of this event, yet he was profoundly affected by it. He saw in these actions the human struggle between good and evil and it remained more important to his way of thinking than recent experiences in which he was directly involved. Another of Malraux's fevered memories was also an event which lingered in his mind even though he was not a participant. He recalled the instance of Alsatian resistance fighters killed by the Germans in a

French village during World War II. The custom of the women of that village was to attend the funeral of any villager by gathering around their own family graves. When the Germans came secretly at dawn to bury the Alsatians, who were from a distant part of France, the first light revealed the village women standing at their graves. This example of fraternity was for Malraux a symbol more important than his own life events. Although Malraux specifically denied that his life was unreeling before his eyes and called his reflections anti-memoirs, this collection of images and inspirations is a truer reflection of his thought processes than a linear chronicle of memories.

PERSONAL MYTH

Selective memory and chronology revision contribute to the development of personal myth, which parallels the role of myth in a culture. Joseph Campbell (1972:44) writes that "myth and ritual give form to human life, not in the way of mere surface arrangements, but in depth." John F. Kihlstrom illustrates this process of myth creation when he describes the earliest memory of a "very feminine" Harvard student enrolled in a demanding medical program. Her earliest memory is sitting as a 3-year-old in a bedroom decorated with frilly curtains and pink wallpaper listening to the record "The Little Engine That Could." That memory according to Kihlstrom "captured what she was all about--trying to combine a feminine role with high achievement" (Nelson 1983:1T).

This merging of old memories and current aspirations is frequently echoed in reflective writing. Masters describes in his memoir the efforts of his mother to correct and sustain the image of his father.

He also recognizes that his own memoir is an attempt to revisit the past in search of motivations and contexts which give meaning to linear events. He writes of his mother and himself (1982:108):

> I have done the same thing in these pages, revisited the same scene or gone over the same material more than once; we both trace and retrace our paths across a small field comprised of five or six summers not to find anything that may have been lost but, somehow, to enlarge the perimeter of our search.

In Philip Berrigan's prison journals (1970), the reporting of daily events is interspersed with philosophical reflections, his efforts to give reason and purpose to his imprisonment. Similarly, in Sören Kierkegaard's journals (Dru 1959), his admissions of melancholy and uncertainty are balanced by his definitions and expectations of himself as a writer.

The importance of myth in the achievement of self-identity is described in the following passage from a novel by Pat Conroy (1980:251). Following the victory of a young cadet over a carnival bully, a legend begins.

> We talked excitedly about the fight, each of us recounting the event in four separate and distorted narratives of the exact same events. By the time we had reached the city, the fight had become fiction, the truth divisible in four distinct incongruent ways. Three hundred unjoined versions would circulate through the barracks by midnight, gathered and appropriated by cadets who were not present but who would claim they were, until the fight would enter into the history

> of that academic year according to joyous laws of storytelling where the annexation of myth becomes a form of truth itself.

William Humphrey describes a similar creation of myth and assigns it comparable importance as he describes the self-image held by a descendant of an old Southern family (1965:38).

> Conscious of a long and vigorous lineage, the Southerner is assured of a long continuity to follow him. Meanwhile in his time he is the priest of the tribal scripture; to forget any part of it would be sacrilege. He treasures the sayings of his kin . . . . If he forgets them, he will be forgotten. If he remembers, he will be remembered, will take the place reserved and predestined for him in the company of his kin, in the realm of myth, outside of time.

These passages contain two important points: myth is a form of truth, and it draws on the past and future to explain the present. Personal myth is the particular subjective context within which experience is arranged and understood. It merges the real with the ideal, achievement with aspiration. Huxley believed that recognition of personal myth is essential to knowing another person. He wrote: "To see ourselves as another person sees us is a most salutary gift. Hardly less important is the capacity to see others as they see themselves" (1954:13). Our myths, writes Campbell, "introduce and unite us" (1972:60). As the historian values both the facts uncovered by the archaeologist and the traditions discovered by the anthropologist, so a student of human

personality should value both fact and myth as complementary ingredients of truth. Journals and memoirs are partial records of the facts and myths that define a life.

CONCLUSION

Deliberate efforts to stimulate introspection--including meditation, biofeedback, values clarification, and intensive journal writing--have gained both public and academic acceptance in recent years. Some of these conscious forms of reflection increase self-awareness and self-confidence, and encourage thoughtful decision-making. But, in addition, we should be aware of the constant unbidden intrapersonal processes, including selection and rearrangement of memories, which allow individuals to define themselves in ways that are highly subjective yet profoundly real. Within each person--sometimes echoed in reflective writing--is the unique ordering of facts which is that person's truth.

REFERENCES CITED

Baker, Russell

1982 Growing Up. New York: Congdon & Weed.

Baldwin, Christina

1977 One to One: Self Understanding Through Journal Writing. New York: M. Evans and Co.

Berrigan, Philip

1970 Prison Journals of a Priest Revolutionary. New York: Ballantine Books.

Bransford, J. D., et al.

1977 Toward Unexplaining Memory. In Perceiving, Acting and Knowing. R. Shaw and J. Bransford, eds. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Campbell, Joseph

1972 Myths to Live By. New York: The Viking Press.

Conroy, Pat

1980 The Lords of Discipline. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Dru, Alexander, ed.

1959 The Journals of Kierkegaard. New York: Harper & Brothers.

Gray, Paul

1982 Ambushes: Time 120(22):96.

Haight, Gordon S.

1942 Introduction to Walden. Henry David Thoreau. Roslyn, New York: Walter J. Black.

Hammarskjöld, Dag

1964 Markings. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Hellman, Lillian

1973 Pentimento. New York: New American Library.

Humphrey, William

1965 The Ordways. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Huxley, Aldous

1954 The Doors of Perception. New York: Perennial Library.

Irving, John

1981 The Hotel New Hampshire. New York: E. P. Dutton.

Kaiser, Robert Blair

1981 The Way of the Journal: Psychology Today 15(13):67.

L'Engle, Madeleine

1974 The Summer of the Great-Grandmother. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Loftus, Elizabeth

1980 Memory. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley.

Malraux, André

1977 Lazarus. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Masters, Hilary

1982 Last Stands: Notes From Memory. Boston: David R. Godine.

Morris, Wright

1981 Will's Boy. New York: Harper & Row.

Nelson, Bryce

1983 Memories: What Do Childhood Remembrances Tell Us? The Des Moines Register February 18:1T.

Orne, Martin T.

1979 The Use and Misuse of Hypnosis in Court: The International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis 27:315-318.

Ornstein, Robert

1972 The Psychology of Consciousness. New York: The Viking Press.

Prescott, Peter S.

1982 Fathers and Sons: Newsweek 100(25):82.

Sarton, May

1976 A World of Light: Portraits and Celebrations. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.

White, Sheldon H., and David B. Pellemer

1979 Childhood Amnesia and the Development of a Socially Accessible Memory System. In Functional Disorders of Memory. John F. Kihlstrom and Frederick J. Evans, Eds. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.